

Cartesian Autonomy¹

JOHN COTTINGHAM

1. Introduction

In contrast to those many philosophers writing today who ignore or downplay philosophy's relationship to its past, Anthony Kenny has chosen to concentrate much of his work over the past thirty years on a number of key figures in the history of philosophy. 'Reaching up to the mind of some great philosopher of the past', Kenny has himself observed, is one very effective way of achieving philosophical insight.² History of philosophy, as practised by Kenny, so far from being a merely antiquarian or instrumental discipline, often turns out to be in itself a very fruitful way of philosophizing. For philosophy is not a matter of acquiring new knowledge but (as Kenny has put it) 'a matter of understanding, that is to say, of organizing what is known'.³ In carefully examining the organizational structures produced by the great minds of the past, we can gain a vivid sense of the philosophical problems they grappled with, which are often surprisingly close to those that occupy the 'cutting-edge' practitioners of today, sometimes prefiguring their mistakes, and frequently anticipating the solutions triumphantly produced as 'new research' by those who disdain to consult anything not published in the last ten years. In describing his own philosophical career, Kenny has been very modest in explaining the rationale for his decision to concentrate on the history of philosophy.⁴ But to read his extraordinarily incisive work on the canonical philosophers, meticulously accurate in its textual scholarship, yet always expressed, as he puts it, 'in contemporary terms',⁵ with an eye to illuminating matters of enduring philosophical importance, is to be left in no doubt that it constitutes, in its own right, a philosophical achievement of a very high order.

René Descartes, one of the major figures whom Kenny has written about, and whom he describes as among those he most admires and from whom he has learnt most,⁶ is a particularly fascinating subject for those concerned with philosophy's relationship to its history. Descartes stands at the threshold of modernity, personifying the brave attempt of modern man to strike out alone, unhampered by the dead weight of past authority, and consulting only 'good sense' or reason, that 'best distributed thing in the world'.⁷ Yet, as is necessarily the case with all of us, Descartes's ways of thinking, even when he seemed to himself to be consulting nothing but his own inner 'good sense', were significantly influenced by the intellectual culture in which he grew up. Although he was a genuine innovator – one of the chief inaugurators of a new phase in our understanding of the physical world, who helped to shape the very idea of 'science' as we now use that term – his metaphysics was in many respects a much more traditional affair. 'Too often,' as Kenny dryly observes, 'when Descartes tells us that something is taught by the natural light in our

¹ This is a draft typescript of the paper that was subsequently published in John Cottingham and Peter Hacker (eds.), *Mind, Method, and Morality: Essays in Honour of Anthony Kenny* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 208-229.

² A. Kenny, *What I Believe* (London: Continuum, 2006), p. 14.

³ Ibid.

⁴ 'In my first years as a professional philosopher, I attempted to make original discoveries in ... areas such as ... the theory of action ... After I had written a few books in this area, however, I realised that I was not able enough to compete with the best of my philosophical colleagues. I came to see that the best contribution I could make to the subject was to provide introductions, in contemporary terms, to the great philosophers of the past.' Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ *What I Believe*, p. 15.

⁷ *Discourse on the Method* [*Discours de la méthode*, 1637], Part One (AT VI 1: CSM I 111).

souls, he produces a doctrine taught by the Jesuits at La Flèche.’⁸ Armed with a formidable knowledge of the strands in classical and medieval thought out of which the backcloth to Cartesian thought was woven, Kenny has been able to reveal many of the hidden assumptions that continued to inform Descartes’s thought, despite the vaunted Cartesian programme of sweeping everything away and ‘starting afresh right from the foundations’.⁹

The tension between the new and the old is strikingly apparent in Descartes’s account of human freedom, one of the most problematic, and still relatively understudied aspects of his thought. On the one hand, the whole Cartesian project for founding a new system of knowledge seems to emphasise the epistemic and volitional independence of the researcher. In his intellectual autobiography, in the *Discourse on the Method*, Descartes describes himself, once having ‘emerged from the control of his teachers’, as deciding to ‘abandon book learning entirely’ and seek knowledge ‘within himself or the great book of the world’.¹⁰ Later, in his metaphysical masterpiece, the *Meditations*, he presents himself as operating ‘quite alone’, as a kind of autonomous rational inquirer, actively exercising his will to discard the baggage of preconceived opinion,¹¹ and pushing doubt to its limits in order to uncover a solid basis for knowledge. All this appears to suggest a distinctly ‘modern’ vision of the free and independent thinker, launching himself on his philosophical inquiries by the self-determining power of the will, which, as Descartes put it in his last published work, is essentially active,¹² and ‘by its nature so free that it can never be constrained.’¹³ On the other hand, we find at the heart of Descartes’s metaphysics much that seems to suggest a very different view of the human mind, as utterly dependent and subordinate, capable of finding enlightenment only through humble contemplation of the ‘immense light’ of its creator.¹⁴ Our will, on this much less modern-looking picture, is operating properly in so far as it passively and indeed automatically acquiesces in what is irresistibly delivered by the light of truth.¹⁵

This paper will start by looking at the two, seemingly incompatible, accounts of human freedom that Descartes provides in the Fourth Meditation, taking as its starting point Anthony Kenny’s highly influential analysis of the relevant text. I shall suggest that Kenny’s analysis is essentially correct, but that it leaves some interesting questions unanswered about the place of activity and passivity in the Cartesian account of our pursuit of truth and goodness. An exploration of these matters will lead us into Descartes’s account of the role of the will in the sphere of morality and the good life, and, finally, to the question of the respective roles of faith and reason in the Cartesian system.

2. Two-way power or spontaneous acquiescence?

In ways which are perhaps hard for many philosophers working today to appreciate, Descartes approaches the human predicament from a deeply ingrained sense of our human creatureliness. The reasoning in the Third Meditation, which leads the meditator to awareness of God by reflecting on

⁸ A. Kenny, *Descartes* (New York: Random House, 1968), pp. 61-2.

⁹ *Meditations on First Philosophy* [*Meditationes de prima philosophia*, 1641], First Meditation (AT VII 17: CSM II 12).

¹⁰ *Discourse*, Part One (AT VI 9: CSM I 115).

¹¹ In rejecting preconceived opinions, the meditator decides to ‘turn his will wholly in the contrary direction [*voluntate plane in contrarium versa*]’: First Meditation (AT VII 22: CSM II 15).

¹² ‘Celles que je nomme [les] actions [de l’âme] sont toutes nos volontés, à cause que nous expérimentons qu’elles viennent directement de notre âme, et semble ne dépendre que d’elle’ *Passions of the Soul* [*Les passions de l’âme*, 1641], art. 17 (AT XII 342: CSM I 335).

¹³ *Passions*, art. 41 (AT XI 359: CSM I 343).

¹⁴ Third Meditation, final paragraph (AT VII 52: CSM II 35-6).

¹⁵ The minds of all of us are so moulded by nature that ‘whenever we perceive something clearly we spontaneously assent to it and are quite unable to doubt its truth’ (omnium animis a natura impressa est ut quoties aliquid clare percipimus, ei sponte assentiamus, et nullo modo possimus dubitare quin sit verum). *Principles of Philosophy* [*Principia philosophiae*, 1644], Part I, art. 43 (AT VIII 21: CSM II 207).

how his own finite mind could not have produced the idea of an infinite being, is in some ways as Anselmian in its character as the later Fifth Meditation argument, which is in part influenced by Anselm's famous 'ontological' argument.¹⁶ Just as this latter argument, as originally presented by Anselm, depends on God's exceeding our power to grasp him (he is greater than anything that can be conceived),¹⁷ so Descartes's argument in the Third Meditation hinges on the inability of a being that is essentially lacking or deficient¹⁸ to produce the idea of God from its own resources. In both writers there is a sense of dependency, as the mind of 'wretched man' is 'stirred up to the contemplation of a God' whose 'lofty heights it cannot reach' (Anselm),¹⁹ or as the meditator endeavours to 'gaze, wonder at and adore' the immense light 'in so far as the eye of the darkened intellect can bear it' (Descartes).²⁰

Whether the devout and submissive tone found in these texts is compatible with the proper goals of philosophical inquiry is a fascinating question which there is no space to explore here.²¹ For our present purposes, the focus on 'creatureliness' sets the scene for a proper understanding of the Cartesian approach to human freedom. Having established his divine authorship, the meditator immediately affirms that this supports the (traditional Judaeo-Christian) conception that we are made in the 'image and likeness' of God.²² One might expect the Cartesian 'rationalist' to identify the key similarity here as residing in our power of reason – the 'natural light' in each soul that somehow derives from the 'immense light' of the Deity. But Descartes in fact goes on to insist that it is 'above all in virtue of the *will* that I bear the image and likeness of God.' Descartes explains that God's will, though infinitely more efficacious, more informed, and ranging over vastly more objects, nevertheless 'does not seem any greater than mine when considered in the essential and strict sense'.²³ This a direct reprise of a thesis of Anselm, who argues in his *De Libero Arbitrio* that although a vast distance separates the free will of humans from that of God, 'yet the definition of

¹⁶ Descartes argues that a supremely perfect being cannot lack the perfection of existence (AT VII 66: CSM II 46), while Anselm's argues that something than which nothing greater can be conceived cannot exist merely in the understanding (*Proslogion* [1077–8], Ch. 2). These formulations are, of course, very far from identical. Nevertheless, despite Descartes's efforts to assert the originality of his own approach, the discussion in the First Replies shows that he was fully familiar with the original Anselmian formulation, and Thomas's criticism of it, so the general influence of Anselm's reasoning is hard to deny. See First Replies, AT VII 115ff: CSM II 82ff, and Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* [1266-73], Pt I, Qu. 2, art. 2.

¹⁷ 'id quo nihil maius cogitare potest'; *Proslogion*, Ch. 2.

¹⁸ 'How could I understand that I doubted or desired – that is lacked something – and that I was not wholly perfect, unless there were in me some idea of a more perfect being which enabled me to recognize my own defects by comparison?' Third Meditation, AT VII 46: CSM II 31.

¹⁹ Anselm's 'exercitio mentis ad contemplandum Deum' is addressed to 'wretched' or 'insignificant' man (*homuncio*), and ends with the humble disclaimer: 'Non tento, Domine, penetrare altitudinem tuam, quia nullatenus comparo illi intellectum meum.' *Proslogion*, Ch. 1.

²⁰ 'immensi hujus luminis pulchritudinem, quantum caligantis ingenii mei acies ferre poterit, intueri, admirari, adorare.' Third Meditation (AT VII 52: CSM II 36). The element of 'devoutness' manifested here and elsewhere in Descartes's philosophy is something that many modern anglophone commentators systematically ignore. For more on this, see J. Cottingham, 'The Desecularization of Descartes', forthcoming in N. Jacobs and C. Firestone (eds), *Rethinking the Enlightenment* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2009).

²¹ Some may be tempted to answer 'Of course it isn't!', but the issue is more complex. Granted, philosophy, the 'love of wisdom', is essentially connected to the pursuit of truth; but it is not clear that all truth is necessarily such as to require detached and dispassionate scrutiny for its proper apprehension. See further J. Cottingham, *The Spiritual Dimension* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), Ch. 1, §3.

²² 'The mere fact that God created me is a very strong basis for believing that I am made in his image and likeness.' Third Meditation (AT VII 51: CSM II 35). The notion goes back to Genesis 1:26-7. For the distinction between the terms 'image' and 'likeness', see Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* Ia, 93, esp. arts. 1 and 9.

²³ 'in se formaliter & praecise spectata'; Fourth Meditation, AT VII 57: CSM II 40.

freedom expressed in the word ought to be identical.²⁴ Divine freedom and human freedom are, as far as their essential nature goes, the same.

If humans are in some sense ‘divinely’ free, one might expect this sense to be explicated in terms of the unrestricted *power* of the will – especially since in discussing God’s freedom in other texts Descartes lays great emphasis on the power of his will.²⁵ But in his conception of freedom Descartes was also influenced by a long tradition which had linked freedom not so much to power as to moral *perfection* or rectitude. Anselm is again a key figure here, for whom the definition of freedom does not include the power of sinning – or else, he argues, we should have to say that the good angels and God have no freedom, ‘which it is impious to say.’²⁶ Thomas Aquinas takes a similar line when he argues that the redeemed in heaven, though wholly free, no longer have the ability to will evil: ‘Where there is no defect in apprehending there can be no volition for evil.’²⁷ And in general, the standard line in Aquinas is that freedom does not require alternative possibilities (the ability to do otherwise). Freedom, he argues, ‘is opposed to the necessity of coercion, but not to the necessity of natural inclination.’²⁸

It is with this background in mind that we must read the crucial text in the Fourth Meditation where Descartes explicates his conception of human freedom.

For the will simply consists in our ability to do or not do something (that is to affirm or deny, to pursue or avoid); or rather, it consists simply in the fact that when the intellect puts something forward, we are moved to affirm or deny or to pursue or avoid it in such a way that we do not feel ourselves to be determined by an external force. For in order to be free, there is no need for me to be capable of going in each of two directions; on the contrary, the more I incline in one direction – either because I clearly understand that reasons of truth and goodness point that way, or because of a divinely produced disposition of my inmost thought – the freer is my choice. Neither divine grace nor natural knowledge ever diminishes freedom; on the contrary, they increase and strengthen it.²⁹

The passage has puzzled commentators, because it seems to start by defining freedom as a two-way power (to x or not to x), and then immediately appears to contradict that by saying that ‘there is no need’ for such a two-way power, but on the contrary all that is necessary is a spontaneous and unconstrained movement of the will³⁰ following on clear apprehension of ‘reasons of truth and goodness’ (what the schoolmen had called ‘freedom of spontaneity’).

²⁴ Quamvis differat liberum arbitrium hominum a libero arbitrio Dei ... definitio tamen hujus libertatis in utriusque, secundum hoc nomen, eadem debet esse. Anselm, *De Libero Arbitrio* [c. 1084], Ch. 1.

²⁵ In God there is ‘no difference between essence and power’. Letter to More of 15 April 1649 (AT V 343: CSMK 373). See also letter to Mersenne of 27 May 1630 (AT I 152: CSMK 25), and *Conversation with Burman* [1648] (AT V 160: CSMK 343).

²⁶ *De Libero Arbitrio*, Ch 1. Sophie Berman, in an illuminating discussion of this passage, comments: ‘the capacity to sin, when added to the will, diminishes freedom, and the lack of the capacity augments it, so that nothing is freer than a will which cannot fall from rectitude into sin.’ *Human Free Will in Anselm and Descartes* (*The Saint Anselm Journal*, 2.1 (Fall 2004), §I.

²⁷ *Quaestiones disputatae de veritate* [1256-9], 22, 6. See further E. Stump, *Aquinas* (London: Routledge, 2003), Ch. 9.

²⁸ *Ibid.* Compare *Summa theologiae* Ia, 82: ‘Natural necessity does not take away the freedom of the will.’

²⁹ ‘quia tantum in eo consistit, quod idem vel facere vel non facere (hoc est affirmare vel negare, prosequi vel fugere) possimus, vel potius in eo tantum, quod ad id quod nobis ab intellectu proponitur affirmandum vel negandum, sive prosequendum vel fugiendum, ita feramur, ut a nulla vi externa nos ad id determinari sentiamus. Neque enim opus est me in utramque partem ferri posse, ut sim liber, sed contra, quo magis in unam propendo, sive quia rationem veri & boni in ea evidentem intelligo, sive quia Deus intima cogitationis meae ita disponit, tanto liberius illam eligo; nec sane divine gratia, nec naturalis cognitio unquam imminuunt libertatem, sed potius augent & corroborant.’ AT VII 57-8: CSM II 40.

³⁰ I am inclined to agree with Michelle Beyssade (contra Kenny) that the Latin phrase ‘ita feramur’ in the passage just quoted ‘is not here used in a passive sense, but is employed in a manner corresponding to the

In Kenny's masterly discussion of this passage, he notes the tension and interprets Descartes as saying (i) that freewill *often* (when we do *not* have clear and distinct perception) consists in the two-way power to assent or not, but *sometimes* (when we *do* perceive clearly) consists only in liberty of spontaneity; and further (ii) that the latter is all that is essential to it.³¹ As we shall see in the next section, part (ii) of this requires some qualification (since a full account of how Cartesian freedom operates needs to introduce a further dimension to our freewill). As for part (i) of Kenny's interpretation, this seems to me entirely correct, though to explain why Descartes expressed himself in the somewhat curious way he did, we need to place the quotation in its exact context. As we have just seen, the whole passage is supposed to be an explication of the sense in which human freewill, considered in its essential nature, is identical with God's (the conjunction 'for', Latin *quia*, which opens the passage, makes it unavoidable that what follows is supposed to be an elucidation of the 'divine' aspect of human freedom just referred to in the previous sentence). Descartes's train of thought, I suggest, leads him naturally to start by interpreting this 'divine' aspect in terms of an unlimited power – the power to x or not to x (and we know from other texts that he does indeed attribute such an unlimited power to God).³² But he then checks or corrects himself, with the 'Or rather' (Latin *vel potius*) that introduces a revised definition, which moves the emphasis away from power and focuses instead on the Anselmian consideration of the moral perfection or rectitude of the will.³³ Its perfection is that it operates spontaneously, in perfect harmony with the deliverances of the intellect concerning truth and goodness. To assent, automatically and spontaneously, to clearly and distinctly perceived truth is no diminution of freedom, Descartes insists, but an 'increase and strengthening' of it. As he puts it a paragraph later, recounting his reasoning in the *Cogito*, 'I *could not but judge* that something I understood so clearly was true, but this was not because I was compelled to judge by some external force, but because a great light in the intellect was accompanied by a great inclination in the will.'³⁴

Comparisons between divine and human attributes are always problematic, for many reasons, but especially because of the traditional doctrine of the divine simplicity and unity, which Descartes accepted. For God, intellect and will are one and the same, and (says Descartes) 'He always understands and wills all things by means of a single identical and perfectly simple act.'³⁵ We humans cannot of course aspire to anything like this (perhaps we cannot even grasp what it would be like for a being to enjoy such unity and simplicity);³⁶ but in the case of clearly and distinctly perceived truths, there can at least be, even in the human case, a kind of perfect harmony between intellect and will. When I apprehend such propositions as 'Cogito ergo sum', or 'two plus three equals five',³⁷ my perception of the truths in question is accompanied by an automatic and

middle voice in Greek: 'middle', because, despite its grammatically passive form, it has an active sense, which corresponds to the reflexive form in French [so that] the correct French rendering would be *se porter* as distinct from *être porté*.' M. Beyssade, 'Descartes's Doctrine of Freedom', in J. Cottingham (ed.), *Reason Will and Sensation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), Ch. 10, pp. 177-206, at p. 194. It is significant that in the 1647 French translation of the *Meditations*, *feramur* is rendered by the active expression, *nous agissons* (AT IX 46).

³¹ A. Kenny, 'Descartes on the Will', in R. J. Butler (ed.), *Cartesian Studies* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1972), Ch. 1, pp. 1-31, at p. 18.

³² See especially *Meditations*, Sixth Replies, AT VII 432: CSM II 291, to be discussed later.

³³ 'The liberty of the will is the capacity of preserving rectitude of the will for the sake of rectitude itself'. Anselm, *De Libero Arbitrio*, Ch. 3.

³⁴ 'ex magna luce in intellectu magna consequuta est propensio in voluntate'; AT VII 59: CSM II 41.

³⁵ *Principles* Pt I, art. 23

³⁶ The simplicity of God, whereby he understands and wills by a single act, is among those truths about God that Descartes says we can understand (*intelligere*) but not grasp (*comprehendere*) or conceive (*concupere*). See *Conversation with Burman*, AT V 165: CSMK 347, and (for discussion of the distinction between understanding and grasping) J. Cottingham (ed.), *Descartes' Conversation with Burman* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1976), p. 76.

³⁷ The arithmetical proposition is the other example Descartes gives as ranking equally with the *Cogito* in the Third Meditation (AT VII 36: CSM II 25).

unavoidable assent or affirmation.³⁸ There is no greater perfection that can be imagined than to have one's voluntary assent inextricably linked to fully clear and adequate intellectual perception in this way; and it makes perfect sense, in Descartes's terms, to see this as the kind of freedom that discloses our human nature as bearing the image and likeness of God, in whom intellect and will are united.

Humans are, however, unlike God in that there are many things they do *not* perceive clearly and distinctly. Here there is a two-way power, to 'plump', indifferently, for one or another of two alternatives (for example, I may say: 'yes, the universe had a beginning in time'; or 'no, it did not'). Is this a quasi-divine power? Clearly not, for many reasons. In the first place, there is a risk of plumping for the wrong answer; and even should my choice happen to be correct, it will be a matter of luck.³⁹ So what is involved in my power of choice in such cases can hardly be a perfection, but rather, as Descartes puts it 'a defect in knowledge or a kind of negation'.⁴⁰ The very fact that the will in such cases is operating 'on its own', as it were, instead of in tandem with the perceptions of the intellect, is a sign of its outreaching its proper function – something Descartes identifies as the very cause of error and sin. So to be 'indifferent' between two alternatives (i.e. to be in a state where I can see no clear reason that would generate unavoidable assent to one rather than the other) is, as Descartes puts it, the very 'lowest grade of freedom'.⁴¹

The upshot of all this is that our will sometimes has, like God's, the power of unrestricted self-determination; but since, when we are deciding what to affirm or to pursue, this power arises only in cases where we are ignorant of the relevant reasons or their relative strength, it turns out to be, in the human case, not a power to rejoice in, but simply a recipe for error. But our will also has the natural disposition to work in total harmony with the clear perceptions of the intellect, and here it approaches the unity and simplicity of the divine mind, in such a way as to qualify as a genuine perfection.

Nevertheless, if this is Descartes's meaning, one wonders if he is not glossing over a radical gulf between what constitutes the perfection of the will in the divine and the human cases. Although I have described the will working 'in harmony' with the intellect when we are assenting to clear and distinct perceptions, phenomenologically speaking what happens may seem more like passivity than activity. The assent of the will 'follows' (*consequitur*) the perception of the intellect, but it does so irresistibly and automatically, without, it seems, the agent having any sense of being in control of events. It is true that the assent is 'spontaneous' – a kind of free-flowing outward movement of approval which is not constrained or 'determined by any external force'. But we do not seem to have a picture of an active, self-determining agent so much as that of an agent who is *responsive* to reasons of truth and goodness that have to be acknowledged whether we like it or not.

To be sure, being naturally responsive to the right reasons (of truth and goodness) is no bad thing. And the 'spontaneity' involved serves to mark out a genuine and important difference from those cases where we are externally constrained (for example by drugs, or hypnotism) to choose a given alternative irrespective of its merit. So 'freedom of enlightenment' (*liberté éclairée*)⁴² is a freedom worth having. But the worry about passivity still remains. We may be uncomfortable about

³⁸ So much so that Spinoza makes a plausible case for saying that intellect and will are really one and the same. Benedict Spinoza, *Ethics* [*Ethica more geometrico demonstrata*, c. 1665], Pt II, prop. 49 Cor. See further J. Cottingham, 'The Intellect, the Will and the Passions: Spinoza's Critique of Descartes', in *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 26:2 (April 1988), pp. 239-57, reprinted in Cottingham *Cartesian Reflections* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), Ch. 10.

³⁹ 'If I go for the alternative that is false, then obviously I shall be in error; if I take the other side, then it is by pure chance that I arrive at the truth, and I shall still be at fault [since my determination of the truth is not based on intellectual perception]'. Fourth Meditation, AT VII 60: CSM II 41.

⁴⁰ 'defectus sive negatio quaedam'; AT VII 58: CSM II 40.

⁴¹ 'infimus gradus libertatis'; Ibid. As many commentators have noted, Descartes's use of the term 'indifference' in discussing the will can give rise to confusion; I shall return to this point later.

⁴² This is the apt label of the great French Cartesian scholar Ferdinand Alquié. See F. Alquié (ed.), *Descartes, Oeuvres Philosophiques* (Paris: Garnier, 1963-73), Vol. II, p. 461.

thinking of ourselves as ‘epistemic robots’, programmed to assent to certain truths (or to judge certain goods worthy of pursuit). And indeed Descartes himself seems to acknowledge this elsewhere, when he links freedom to responsibility, and refers to that ‘supreme perfection’ in humans, whereby they are ‘the authors of their actions and deserving of praise for what they do’. He goes on:

We do not praise automatons for accurately producing all the movements they were designed to perform, because the production of these movements occurs necessarily ... By the same principle, when we embrace the truth, our doing so voluntarily is *much more to our credit than would be the case if we could not do otherwise*.⁴³

The upshot is that Descartes himself seems to hanker for a more active, more autonomous conception of human freedom than his exposition in the Fourth Meditation apparently allows for. To see how he provides the resources for this stronger conception of human freedom (strong enough to support epistemic and moral responsibility), we need to look elsewhere.

3. *A real and positive power of the will: ‘executive freedom’*

Early critics of the *Meditations* were worried by the ‘spontaneity’ approach in the Fourth Meditation, because it detached freedom from the absolute two-way power which seemed to them essential, at least for divine freedom. The concept of *indifference*, they pointed out, which Descartes had described as not belonging to the perfection of the will but only to its imperfection (namely, when we are ignorant of the reasons favouring one choice over another), had traditionally been associated with the absolute power of God, who was standardly considered to be entirely free or ‘indifferent’ – for example in deciding either to create or not create the world. But his choice was clearly not an arbitrary plumping in the absence of reasons. ‘Who doubts’, asked these critics, ‘that God has always perceived with the clearest vision what he should do or refrain from doing?’ So surely, they insisted, clear and distinct perception should not be thought to remove indifference of choice.⁴⁴

On the terminological point, concerning ‘indifference’, Descartes readily admitted, in his reply to these critics and elsewhere, that his own usage might have been somewhat confusing. If indifference (as per the Fourth Meditation) means wavering through ignorance and then arbitrarily plumping for one alternative over the other, this is indeed the lowest grade of freedom, greatly surpassed by the spontaneous assent to truth where ignorance disappears and one alternative is clearly seen as correct. But the ‘indifference’ found in God’s will is a different matter – it is a kind of supreme and unrestricted power of the will. Since God is pure activity, nothing is really prior to his will: it makes no sense to speak of anything being ‘thought of in the divine intellect as true or good prior to his will to make it so.’ And hence

the supreme indifference found in God is the supreme indication of his omnipotence. But as for humans, we find that the nature of all goodness and truth is already determined by God, and our will cannot tend towards anything else ... We are never indifferent except when we do not know which of the two alternatives is the better or truer ... Hence the indifference which belongs to human freedom is very different from that which belong to divine freedom.⁴⁵

This clears up the terminological point, but it does, once more, place a radical gulf between human and divine freedom. If goodness and truth is already, as it were, laid out for us, waiting for us to respond to it, by accurate intellectual perception and the automatic assent that follows, then is

⁴³ *Principles*, Pt I, art. 37 (AT VIII 18-19: CSM I 205); emphasis supplied.

⁴⁴ *Meditations*, Sixth Objections, AT VII 416-7: CSM II 280-1.

⁴⁵ *Meditations*, Sixth Replies, AT VII 432-3: CSM II 292.

Descartes saying we have to give up any aspiration to ‘freedom of indifference’ in the stronger, positive sense in which it is ascribed to God?

Some might be inclined to respond by saying that if we are being urged to give up this ‘stronger’, more divine kind of freedom, so much the better, since it does not make much sense anyway. The ideal of active self-determination ascribed to God, which we humans fall short of, is not easy to understand, because we cannot really grasp what it could mean for a mind to will and to understand by means of a single simple act. In the case of the truths of logic (which Descartes regarded as decreed by God’s will),⁴⁶ it is not easy to see how something that is created by an act of will could also be a *truth* for its creator in any recognizable sense. In the ethical as opposed to the logical sphere, where we are considering the eternal moral truths such as that cruelty is wrong, things hardly seem easier. Perhaps what is envisaged is something along the lines of what Kant meant when he spoke of the autonomy of a ‘rational nature’, as that aspect of the will whereby it must be considered as *selbstgesetzgebend* (‘giving the law to itself’).⁴⁷ But even if such a notion is intelligible, there can clearly be no question of such autonomy in the human case. Human beings cannot (despite the later confused fantasy of Nietzsche)⁴⁸ create value by an act of will, as if something could be made to be good or bad merely by a decision to pursue or avoid it. For all his talk of the ‘divine’ nature of human freedom, would it not be far clearer and more coherent for Descartes to abandon this notion, and rest content, as indeed he appears to be doing in this passage from the Sixth Replies, with the more modest conception of ‘freedom of enlightenment’, where the fantasy of self-determination gives way to rational acquiescence or allegiance to the reasons of truth and goodness that constrain our assent once we grasp them properly?

Certainly, freedom of enlightenment is, and remains, a central (and sound) plank in Descartes’s account of human freedom. But he did also insist that the human will possesses what he called, in a letter to the Jesuit Denis Mesland, a ‘real and positive power of self-determination’ (*une puissance réelle et positive de se déterminer*).⁴⁹ As Kenny has elegantly shown in his analysis of this letter, this does not contradict the earlier account of spontaneous and automatic assent to clearly and distinctly perceived truths. It emerges from the letter that we do enjoy a two-way power to determine whether we assent or not, but that the only way this can be done is by failing to *attend* to the relevant reasons. ‘As soon as the attention turns from the reasons that show us that the thing is good for us ... we can call up before our mind some other reason to make us doubt it, and so suspend our judgement.’⁵⁰

Focusing on the notion of *attention* seems to me to provide Descartes with a convincing way of vindicating the kind of ‘active’ freedom necessary for human epistemic and moral responsibility, without forcing him into a doubtfully coherent model of quasi-divine ‘creative liberty’. The importance of attention in Descartes’s analysis of the workings of the mind can scarcely be exaggerated. Right from the construction of the foundations of his system, when

⁴⁶ ‘From all eternity He willed and understood them to be, and by that very fact he created them.’ Letter to Mersenne of 27 May 1630 (AT I 152: CSMK 25).

⁴⁷ *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals* [*Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten*, 1785], Ch 2; Akademie edition (Berlin: Reimer/De Gruyter, 1900–), Vol. IV, pp. 436, 431; transl. T. E. Hill Jr and A. Zweig (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 236, 232.

⁴⁸ Nietzsche envisages a ‘new philosopher with a spirit ‘strong enough to revalue and invert eternal values.’ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil* [*Jenseits von Gut und Böse*, 1886], transl. W. Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1966), §203. Some of the relevant considerations against the Nietzschean position are raised in my *The Spiritual Dimension* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), Ch. 3, esp. §2. See also section 2 of J. Cottingham ‘Impartiality and Ethical Formation’, forthcoming in B. Feltham et al. (eds), *Partiality and Impartiality in Ethics*.

⁴⁹ Letter to Mesland of 2 May 1644 (AT IV 116: CSMK 234).

⁵⁰ *Ibid.* See also Kenny, ‘Descartes on the Will’, pp. 23–4. Kenny goes on to argue, very convincingly to my mind, that a later letter (supposedly to Mesland) of 9 February 1645, arguing that ‘it is always open to us to hold back from pursuing a clearly known good’ (AT IV173: CSMK 245), contains nothing that cannot be reconciled with the position taken in the earlier letter, namely that the only way to avoid assenting to a clearly perceived truth is by failure of attention.

considering how far doubt can be pushed (might I not go wrong even in the simplest matters – even adding two and three or counting the sides of a square?), Descartes makes a crucial distinction between what can happen at one remove, as it were, and what can happen ‘*whenever I turn to the truths themselves*’.⁵¹ I may entertain radical doubts about my ability to apprehend mathematical truths, but when I actually focus on ‘two plus three equals five’, then the natural (divinely created) propensity of the mind to assent to clear and distinct truths kicks in, and I cannot but spontaneously and immediately accept the truth of the proposition. The time-dimension is crucial: just as the certainty of the Cogito in the Second Meditation lasts only ‘as long as it is put forward by me and conceived in my mind’ (*quoties profertur vel mente concipitur*),⁵² so the determination of the will to assent to the clear deliverances of the intellect lasts only so long as I am focused on the relevant propositions (*quoties ad ipsas res ... me converto*).⁵³ Now the crucial point is that this focusing is a positive act of the will, within our direct voluntary control. This helps to explain how, for Descartes, human beings are more than doxastic robots, obeying the programs of their divinely-designed minds. They are truly in control of the circumstances of their search for the truth, since the irresistibility of the natural light will always be contingent on their own free choice as to how far they keep the light focused.⁵⁴

So the power to attend, or to relax or divert our attention, is a basic power of the will that turns out to be crucial for the exercise of some of our most important human intellectual capacities. Shifting the focus to this basic power takes us to a more fundamental level of freedom than both kinds of freedom hitherto discussed: on the one hand, the freedom to choose between alternatives (or to accept the truth of this proposition rather than that); and on the other hand the ‘freedom of spontaneity’ which is manifest in the easy flow of a straightforward judgement guided by reason and free from external interference. Instead it takes us to the kind of very simple power that we exercise when someone says ‘Consider this piece of news!’, or ‘Picture an orange cut in half!’, or ‘Think of a number less than five!’ If one wants a label to distinguish this kind of freedom from both freedom of spontaneity and freedom of ‘indifference’, one might decide to call it *executive freedom*.⁵⁵ Notice, moreover, that when I exercise such a power, I am aware of being its ‘author’ in a direct and immediate way that seems to allow no room for doubt or quibble. ‘Concentrate on this right-angled triangle.’ Unless I am exhausted or drugged or otherwise incapacitated, I am simply free to do it (or refuse to do it), ‘just like that’.⁵⁶

I suggest, then, that underpinning all Descartes’s discussions of the various types and degrees of freedom so far examined is a more basic notion, that of ‘executive freedom’, which he took to be something absolutely simple and self-evident. This is consistent with many of his remarks about the axiomatic nature of our freedom – remarks that cannot without strain be applied to the other kinds of freedom so far discussed. Our freewill, he said, was *per se nota* (or, in French, *se connaît sans preuve*); it is ‘one of the first and most common notions that are innate in us’.⁵⁷ Moreover, it has the kind of self-evidence that is directly attested by our inner experience: We just have to ‘go down deep into ourselves, and we will simply see that the our will is absolute and

⁵¹ AT VII 36: CSM II 25.

⁵² AT VII 25: CSM II 17.

⁵³ Third Meditation, AT VII 36: CSM II 25.

⁵⁴ For further discussion of the notion of ‘doxastic responsibility’ in Descartes, see my ‘Descartes and the Voluntariness of Belief’, in *The Monist*, Vol. 85, no 3 (October 2002), pp. 343-360, repr. in Cottingham, *Cartesian Reflections*, Ch. 11.

⁵⁵ Executive freedom does, to be sure, have the kind of spontaneous and unconstrained ‘flow’ associated with freedom of spontaneity, and may also be linked to the ability to decide otherwise associated with freedom of indifference, but unlike both the former and the latter it is not concerned with the making of judgements.

⁵⁶ As Descartes sometimes puts it, such volitions are acts which proceed ‘directly from the soul’; or as we might say, they come directly from me, so that I am their author in an immediate and straightforward sense. See *Passions of the Soul* [*Les passions de l’âme*, 1641], art. 17 (AT XII 342: CSM I 335).

⁵⁷ *Principles*, Pt I, art. 39.

perfect.⁵⁸ Or again, ‘we have inner awareness of our freedom’.⁵⁹ It is a freedom, furthermore, that is manifested both in simple ‘mentalistic’ cases, like attending to a mathematical proposition, and also in the performance (again, barring incapacitating circumstances) of simple bodily actions (‘look over here!’). There is for Descartes not quite the same immediacy in the case of bodily movements, since the efficacy of our volitions (unlike what happens in the purely mental case) has to be mediated by physiological events (in the brain and nervous system); but he is quite comfortable about citing physical actions as equally good illustrations of the self-evident freedom of the will, which is ‘by its nature so free that it cannot be constrained’.⁶⁰

Once the importance of this basic executive freedom has been grasped, it becomes easy to see how Descartes was so confident about our having the kind of authorship of our actions that legitimates responsibility, praise and blame. Because our divinely bestowed propensity to assent to clearly perceived truth is dependent on exercising our freedom to attend or otherwise to the relevant propositions, humans enjoy a genuine responsibility for their beliefs. They retain the status of autonomous and active agents, who can be praised for opening themselves to the truth, or blamed for failing to keep focused on it. This autonomy, of course, has a darker side. Since the infallibly truth-obedient propensity of the mind depends on the capriciously attentive power of the will, the freedom which God or Nature⁶¹ gave us was bestowed at a price – the price of allowing the possibility of evil, whether epistemic error or moral transgression, into the world. The former, and the strategies for avoiding it, are of course the main theme of the Fourth Meditation, while the latter and how to guard against it are a principal theme of Descartes’s last work, *The Passions of the Soul*. It is to the role of the will in the moral sphere that we shall now turn, in the final section of this exploration of Descartes’s account of freedom.

4. Freedom, moral goodness and faith

Men preferred the darkness to the light, says the Fourth Evangelist,⁶² implying what is glaringly and sadly obvious, that humans always have the ability to turn away from the good and the true. As we have seen, what Descartes adds to this ancient theme is that this can happen with regard to clearly perceived truths only, as it were, when we fail to attend, or relax the attention, letting the relevant propositions slip out of focus. But how can we prevent things going awry in the practical sphere of moral action and the conduct of life?

In the case of theoretical reason, Descartes offers a very simple recipe for the avoidance of error: ‘remember to withhold judgement when the truth is not clearly perceived.’⁶³ In the practical sphere, this will evidently not work, as he had noted as early as the *Discourse*. The exigencies of ordinary human life, and the need to make prompt decisions to cope with everyday contingencies, would mean we should be paralysed, or starve, if we made decisions based only on clear and adequate intellectual perception.⁶⁴ (As David Hume aptly observed, there is no guarantee – at least

⁵⁸ ‘descendat modo unusquisque in seipsum et experiatur an perfectam et absolutam habeat voluntatem’; *Conversation with Burman*, AT V 159: CSMK 342.

⁵⁹ ‘intime conscii sumus nostrae libertatis’; *ibid.* See also Cottingham (ed.), *Descartes’ Conversation with Burman*, pp. xxxviff. Compare Third Replies: ‘I have made no assumptions about freedom beyond what all of us experience within ourselves’ (AT VII 191: CSM II 134).

⁶⁰ *Passions of the Soul*, art. 41. According to Descartes’s somewhat bizarre theory of psycho-physical interaction, the soul has the direct power to ‘simply by willing’ to bring about movements in the pineal gland, just as, in the purely mental case, it has the power to, for example, attend to a given mathematical truth. For an illuminating discussion of Descartes’s views on the functioning of the will in relation to the body, see D. Clarke, *Descartes’s Theory of the Mind* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2003), pp. 151ff.

⁶¹ The Spinozistic sounding phrase ‘God or Nature’ is in fact Cartesian: see *Principles of Philosophy*, Pt I, art. 28. See further J. Cottingham, *The Rationalists* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), pp. 92ff.

⁶² ‘ἔγαπῆσεν ἡοὶ ἀνθρώποι μᾶλλον τὸ σκότος ἢ τὸ φῶς.’ John 3:19.

⁶³ Fourth Meditation (AT VII 61-2: CSM II 43).

⁶⁴ ‘In everyday life we must often act without delay ... when it is not in our power to discern the truest opinions.’ *Discourse*, Part Three, AT VI 25: CSM I 123.

not one that the mind can obtain by carefully focusing on the relevant propositions – that the bread I ate at lunchtime will not poison me at supper.⁶⁵) Provisionally then, until we have worked out a moral system based on clear and distinct perceptions of the good, we may have to rely on conventional moral codes and probabilistic rules of thumb in working out how best to live.

Nevertheless, eventually we should, in Descartes's view, be able to work out a rational blueprint for the good life.⁶⁶ As we have seen, Descartes maintained in the Fourth Meditation that the intellect had the power to clearly and distinctly perceive 'reasons of goodness' no less than 'reasons of truth' (and that once clearly perceived, these truths irresistibly generate the assent of the will). So for Descartes, there is at least the possibility of our being able to have access to a complete science of morals, an integrated structure of principles for the conduct of life, just as much as is the case with the other branches of the Cartesian tree of knowledge, which grow organically out of the same metaphysical roots.⁶⁷ And those who are careful and attentive enough can take advantage of that knowledge by carefully focusing on the relevant principles in their day-to-day lives.

There is, however, a special problem about the practical implementation of this programme. As noted already, the irresistibility of the natural light is in place only so long as the will employs its 'executive' power of remaining focused on the relevant truths. So the key to the moral life is a 'firm and constant resolution to use our freedom well'.⁶⁸ It is good, as Descartes wrote to Mesland, 'to pay attention and thus ensure that our will follows so promptly the light of our understanding that it is in no way indifferent'.⁶⁹ But remaining so focused is particularly hard in the domain of ordinary life and action, because of the operation of the *passions*– the emotions and feelings arising from our embodied nature as human beings⁷⁰ – which may exert a distracting influence. So although the intellect may clearly perceive that *x* is a better course of action than *y*, the lesser good involved in *y* may be represented (as a result of lust, or ambition, or greed, for example) in an alluring light which diverts our concentration:

Often passion makes us believe certain things to be much better and more desirable than they are; then, when we have taken much trouble to acquire them, and in the process lost the chance of possessing other more genuine goods, possession of them brings home to us their defects; and thence arise dissatisfaction, regret and remorse.⁷¹

To counteract the potentially damaging effects of the passions, Descartes (as I have explored at length elsewhere)⁷² devised an elaborate strategy for re-programming them, with the aid of scientific knowledge of their physiological basis. With sufficient ingenuity, he envisaged that the passions could be trained and guided so as to subserve the clear perceptions of the intellect about what is truly valuable, rather than, as so often happens, pulling us off course.⁷³ This is, in effect, the

⁶⁵ David Hume, *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding* [1748], Sectn IV, part 2.

⁶⁶ As he resoundingly declared in the preface to the French edition of his magnum opus, the *Principles of Philosophy*, the construction of a perfect moral system – *la plus parfaite morale* – was to be the crowning aim of his philosophy. Preface to the 1647 French translation of the *Principles of Philosophy* (AT IXB 14-15: CSM I 186).

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ *Passions of the Soul*, art. 153, speaking of the master virtue of 'generosity'.

⁶⁹ Letter of 2 May 1644, (AT IV 116: CSMK 234).

⁷⁰ *Passions of the Soul*, arts. 27-34.

⁷¹ Letter to Elizabeth of 1 September 1645 (AT IV 284-5: CSMK 264). Descartes goes on to say that the passions often 'represent the goods to which they tend with greater splendour than they deserve and they make us imagine pleasure to be much greater before we possess them than our subsequent experiences show them to be.'

⁷² See J. Cottingham, *Philosophy and the Good Life: Reason and the passions in Greek, Cartesian and Psychoanalytic Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), Ch. 3.

⁷³ See for example *Passions of the Soul*, art. 50.

old Platonic and Stoic dream of the mastery of the more recalcitrant parts of the soul, but in Descartes's vision this goal is realised through drawing on our scientific knowledge of the workings of the nervous system and how those workings are correlated with the operation of the emotions.

The resulting picture appears in many respects to put human beings very much in charge of the pursuit of the good life. Cartesian man seems to emerge as a relatively autonomous being, making use of scientific knowledge to control and channel the emotions, and exercising an unconstrained executive liberty in focusing on the truths disclosed by reason. It is true that all the faculties involved here are seen by Descartes as ultimately bestowed on us by the creator, but the programme for the conduct of life seems to fall almost entirely within the domain of natural reason, in the widest sense of that term, rather than drawing on revelation, or positing any need for religious belief as a key ingredient of a worthwhile human existence. This accords with the undoubted fact that Descartes was a thinker who constructed his philosophy as far as possible without reference to revealed theology, or matters of faith.⁷⁴ Nevertheless, I should like to conclude this paper by suggesting that the notion of faith does in fact occupy a legitimate and coherent place within his overall conception of the best life for human beings.

In the Dedicatory Letter prefaced to the first edition of the *Meditations*, Descartes deploys a fairly standard argument that religious faith is an auxiliary to moral virtue because it offers to those struggling to be virtuous the rewards of the afterlife.⁷⁵ In view of his subsequent acknowledgment of the difficulties we face in remaining focused on the good, the argument has a clear relevance to his conception of the human moral predicament, and hence may be more than merely a conventional piece of deference to the theologians to whom the letter was addressed. However that may be, there is a more extended, indeed philosophically crucial, discussion of faith, in the second of the sets of Replies published with the *Meditations*, where it emerges as one of the sources of illumination alongside the natural light of reason. Descartes declares that there is for the human mind a 'double source' of clarity or transparency (*duplex claritas sive perspicuitas*), one coming from the natural light, the other from divine grace.⁷⁶ The latter, the *lumen supernaturale*,⁷⁷ gives rise, no less than the natural light, to the irresistible assent of the intellect. Indeed, the phrasing in the key passage from the Fourth Meditation which we quoted earlier can now be understood better: irresistible assent can be produced *either* by 'clearly perceived reasons of truth and goodness' (the natural light) *or* by a 'divinely produced disposition of my thought' (the supernatural light).⁷⁸

Being open to divine grace, then, can yield illumination which is as valid as the illumination produced by rational cognition of clear and distinctly perceived truths. Yet there is clearly a problem which Descartes needs to face here. The foundation stone of his entire philosophical method is that we should not give our assent to matters that are not clear. Yet the truths of faith (for example the doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation) evidently do not come anywhere near the kind of perspicuous self-evidence that applies to the Cogito, say, or the proposition that two plus three makes five. The most Descartes was himself prepared to say about the concept of the Trinity, for example, was that it contained *elements* that were clear (for example, the number three!).⁷⁹ So despite the talk of 'illumination', one may complain that Descartes is violating his own fundamental philosophical principles by defending assent to a class of revealed truths. There may, of course, be many motives for religious allegiance to articles of faith, but (so runs the complaint) such allegiance can hardly be presented as virtuous from an epistemic point of view.

⁷⁴ 'I wanted as far as possible to avoid all theological controversies and stay within the limits of natural philosophy.' To Mesland of 2 May 1644 (AT IV 117: CSMK 234). For a general discussion of Descartes's attitude to theology and theologians, see Cottingham, *Descartes' Conversation with Burman*, pp. 115ff.

⁷⁵ Dedicatory Letter to the Dean and Doctors of the Faculty of Theology at Paris, AT VII 2: CSM II 3.

⁷⁶ AT VII 147-8: CSM II 105.

⁷⁷ Second Replies, AT VII 148, line 27: CSM II 106.

⁷⁸ AT VII 58 lines 1-2: CSM II 40.

⁷⁹ *Conversation with Burman*, AT V 165: CSMK 347.

A similarly negative view of the epistemic and ethical status of faith has been strongly advanced by Anthony Kenny (not in connection with Descartes, but as a general aspect of his own philosophical outlook, though it has obvious relevance to our present discussion of Descartes). ‘In my view,’ Kenny argues, ‘faith is not a virtue, but a vice, unless certain conditions are fulfilled.’ The conditions, he goes on to explain include ‘that the existence of God can be rationally established without appeal to faith’, and that ‘the historical events that are claimed to constitute the divine revelation must be independently established as historically certain – as having the same certainty, say, as that Charles I was beheaded in London, or that Cicero was once consul at Rome.’⁸⁰ As far as the first condition goes, Descartes would presumably have claimed to have met it in his proofs in the Third and Fifth Meditations, though it is (to say the least) a debatable question whether they are successful. What of the second condition, and in general of his attitude to the evidence for revealed truths, which cannot by their nature aspire to demonstrative certainty?

Descartes never discusses the historical probabilities of the central events of the Christian faith to which he himself subscribed, but his remarks on the nature of revealed truths suggest he might well have been happy to concede that the evidence for the Resurrection, for example, does not come near to meeting the standards of historical certainty proposed by Kenny. In fact, Descartes was prepared to concede that many revealed truths were not just inadequately evidenced but positively obscure in their content. ‘No one has ever denied that the subject matter [of many articles of faith] may be obscure – indeed obscurity itself’. But, he continued, we may still have a ‘formal reason’, as opposed to a reason based on the clarity of the subject matter, for accepting them:

This formal reason consists in a certain inner light which comes from God, and when we are supernaturally illumined by it we are confident that what is put forward for us to believe has been revealed by God himself. And it is quite impossible for him to lie; this is more certain than any natural light, and is often even more evident because of the light of grace.⁸¹

If the ‘reason’ invoked here is supposed to be of the kind which might survive dispassionate and impartial scrutiny by any rational inquirer, then the prospects do not look good. The believer may be subjectively ‘confident’ that a given article of faith is one which God himself has inclined him, by grace, to accept; but that plainly does not constitute independent rational support for its truth.

In his subsequent comments on the status of faith, and the other ‘matters which should be embraced by the will’, in the paragraph following that just quoted, Descartes goes on to refer to a distinction he frequently makes elsewhere between ‘the conduct of life, and the contemplation of the truth’. In the former sphere, he remarks, ‘I am very far from believing that we should assent only to what is clearly perceived.’⁸² Stephen Menn, in a sensitive interpretation of Descartes’s position in this passage, has commented that ‘the confidence in revealed truth is analogous to confidence in the other sorts of truth we need for living as happily as possible; just as belief in the nutritive value of food is necessary for my physical health, so belief in the saving value of grace is necessary for my spiritual health, for my general well being in this world and the next.’⁸³

Unfortunately, the analogy on which this implicit defence of Descartes is founded seems not a particularly satisfying one. In the conduct of life, my confidence in certain courses of action, for example eating certain types of food, though not based on ‘clear and distinct perception’, is at least based on good probabilistic evidence. But in the religious case, we seem to lack anything like similar evidence that assent to the articles of faith is necessary for morally and spiritually healthy life. We have ample grounds for thinking that people who do not eat properly have wretched lives. But (unless we make the question-begging manoeuvre of allowing only a religious life to count as

⁸⁰ Kenny, *What I Believe*, pp. 59-60.

⁸¹ Second Replies, AT VII 148: CSM II 105.

⁸² AT VII 149: CSM II 106.

⁸³ S. Menn, *Descartes and Augustine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998). p. 332.

‘spiritually healthy’), religious faith, to judge from ordinary observation, appears to be neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for a morally and spiritually healthy life. There are many non-believers who lead morally healthy and harmonious lives, and, conversely, many believers who lead disordered and morally dubious lives.

A more plausible defence of the epistemic respectability of faith can be drawn from materials provided by Descartes’s contemporary, Blaise Pascal. Pascal, like Kenny, took a dim view both of purported logical demonstrations of God, and he would (one may reasonably infer) have taken an equally dim view of basing the claims of faith on historical evidence. We are just not in a position, Pascal argued, to establish any conclusions about the existence and nature of God using the impartial tools of reason.⁸⁴ But he maintained that a volitional act of commitment (for example starting to engage in practices of worship) would in due course generate valid faith.⁸⁵ On a plausible interpretation of this proposal, what Pascal is suggesting is a deliberate act of opening oneself to the possibility of receiving divine grace. But this is not a completely irrational ‘leap of faith’ of a Kierkegaardian kind,⁸⁶ since the idea is that the subject *starts engaging in worship from an agnostic perspective* (that such a thing is possible is, interestingly, something that Kenny himself has eloquently argued for in his later work).⁸⁷ Such an individual, Pascal argues, may in due course *become* a believer, in virtue of subsequent internal changes that have put him in a position to receive evidence which will be retrospective confirmation that the initial decision to engage in religious praxis was a good one.⁸⁸ Although his initial stance may have been neutral or sceptical, further down the line after making the commitment the ‘light of grace’ or *lumen gratiae* (to use the Cartesian phrase)⁸⁹ will disclose evidence that simply was not available before the commitment was made.⁹⁰

So although the Pascalian recommendation to act ‘as if you believe’ may seem like a piece of irrationality, it is not. There are many other cases where a prior practical commitment has to be made in order to open the subject to the possibility of receiving evidence that may retrospectively confirm the validity of that commitment. The kind of commitment involved in a close personal relationship such as marriage provides one such example: the evidence which will emerge, if all goes well, to establish that the choice was the right one is simply not available ‘from the outside’,

⁸⁴ Blaise Pascal, *Pensées* ('Thoughts') [1670], ed. L. Lafuma (Paris: Seuil, 1962), no. 418.

⁸⁵ ‘You want to cure yourself of unbelief, and you ask for remedies: learn from those who were hampered like you and who now wager all they possess. These are people who know the road you would like to follow; they are cured of the malady for which you seek a cure; so follow them and begin as they did – *by acting as if they believed*, by taking holy water, having masses said, and so on. In the natural course of events this in itself will make you believe, this will train you.’ *Pensées*, no 418.

⁸⁶ Kierkegaard talks in very different terms from Pascal’s, of an existential, and perhaps even contra-rational struggle to maintain a willed act of faith, ‘out on the deep, over seventy thousand fathoms of water.’ Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* [*Afsluttende Uvidenskabelig Efterskrift*, 1846], transl. D. F. Swenson (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1941), p. 182.

⁸⁷ See his account of his ‘devout agnosticism’ in A. Kenny, ‘Worshipping an Unknown God’, *Ratio*, Vol. XIX no 4 (December 2006), pp. 441-53, repr. in J. Cottingham (ed.), *The Meaning of Theism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), Ch. 4.

⁸⁸ For this interpretation of Pascal, see Ward Jones, ‘Religious Conversion, Self-Deception and Pascal’s Wager’, *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 36:2 (April 1998), p. 172.

⁸⁹ AT VII 148, line 12: CSM II 105.

⁹⁰ Such evidence, it should be stressed, is not simply a matter of subjective feeling or conviction. It may, for example, involve glimpsing the presence of God in the sacraments, or in the beauty of the natural world; for more about the status of such intimations, see Alvin Plantinga, ‘Religion and Epistemology’, in E. Craig (ed.) *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 1998). vol. 8, p. 214. The facts so accessed are, the believer would say, perfectly objective ones, even though the conditions for accessing them may involve an internal change in the subject. For more on objective truth and subjective accessibility conditions, see J. Cottingham ‘What Difference does it Make? The Nature and Significance of Religious Belief’, in *Ratio*, Vol. XIX no 4 (December 2006), pp. 401-20, repr. in Cottingham (ed.), *The Meaning of Theism*, Ch. 2.

from the standpoint of one coldly requiring prior demonstrative or probabilistic warrant before embarking on the journey.⁹¹ Whether Descartes would have been sympathetic to this Pascalian approach we cannot know. But it is consistent with his assertion of a supernatural light that operates via grace to produce a ‘disposition of my inmost thoughts’ to assent to matters where dispassionate rational scrutiny alone could not reveal the truth.

What, in conclusion, becomes of the ‘modern’ Cartesian man, striking out independently to establish the truth? The actual Descartes, as we know, retained his religious faith throughout his life, and there is no reason to doubt the genuineness of his convictions. His metaphysical inquiries, as we have seen, though premised on the need for critical rational scrutiny of every stage of the reasoning, nevertheless express a strong sense of the human meditator’s dependency on the divine source of truth and goodness whose contemplation ‘enables us to know the greatest joy of which we are capable in this life.’⁹² In his account of our freedom, he laid emphasis on our spontaneous and irresistible assent generated by the ‘reasons of truth and goodness’ that proceed from that source, while at the same time preserving our human responsibility by making that assent dependent on the individual’s power to attend to the light, or turn away from it. The overall picture of our human freedom is an attractive and coherent one,⁹³ which is all of a piece with its author’s theistic worldview. And if the wholehearted adoption of that worldview required him to take on board truths of faith which could not be validated by detached rational scrutiny, such commitment can, if the argument of this closing section has been right, be defended as consistent with the demands of philosophical integrity. For Cartesian autonomy, in the end, is the autonomy of a being who recognizes its own limitations; it lies in the proper exercise of reason and will by dependent subjects whose ultimate welfare depends on orienting ourselves towards a truth and goodness we did not create.

⁹¹ See further Cottingham *The Spiritual Dimension*, Ch. 1, §3.

⁹² Third Meditation, final sentence.

⁹³ Notwithstanding some confusions and unclarity in some of his formulations; see, for example, those exposed by Kenny in ‘Descartes on the Will’, p. 31.